



Cattle and Sheep Ranches Share the West

*Note from Utah State University 23 Aug 1987
have reported:*

*When sheep & cattle are on the same
range, they all do better:*

- 1. Multiple births in sheep, increases.*
- 2. Muscle mass is increased in cattle.*

Quick stop: Where buffalo still roam

By James Joseph

Scarcely more than 150 years ago they blackened the western plains. Countless millions of buffalo, the American bison, ranged from Tennessee to Nevada.

Some herds comprised as many as 5 million majestic animals, and stretched as far as the eye could see. Famed frontiersman/showman Col. William "Buffalo Bill" Cody, hired by the Kansas-Pacific Railroad in 1867 to supply meat for its rail-laying gangs, claimed single-handedly to have killed 4,280 buffalo in eight months. His count was never disputed. Between 1840 and 1880 the great, docile herds fell prey to a big-game slaughter unprecedented in history. By 1900, only 20 wild bison were known to exist.

Today, upward of 400 shaggy descendants of those final few buffalo still roam the range — the National Bison Range, a one-of-its-kind Quick Stop off I-90, northwest of Missoula, Mont.

Here, across 18,540 acres of the magnificent Flathead (river) Valley, you can view bison in their natural habitat, take either of two self-guided auto tours into the buffalo range and, each October, witness the range's "fall spectacular": the roundup of the range's entire bison population.

The 19-mile (about two-hour) Red Sleep Mountain auto tour puts you among a bison herd that is historic because of its direct bloodlines to the few wild bison ranging the plains at the turn of this century. The good gravel-and-dirt tour road has some long climbs and fairly steep downgrades.

Along the way you're also likely to see others of the great federal range's inhabitants, including sizable numbers of elk, antelope, deer (there are more than 400 of them) and ever-shy Bighorn sheep. Overhead and underfoot the range's myriad birds (from golden eagles to ruffed grouse) make this a wildlife wonder place. A few miles north of the range lie the Ninepipe and the Pablo National Wildlife Refuges, likewise administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. During summer, the refuges play host to as many as 80,000 migratory ducks and geese, most of them flyway visitors from Canada's far north.

The range's shorter self-guided auto tour, the Buffalo Prairie Drive (about half an hour) lets you see bison close up and exhibits animals conveniently corralled along your way.

Both auto tours begin and end at the Visitor Center where exhibits and interpretive demonstrations trace the life and extinction of the bison on the Great Plains.

Although it is one of the nation's oldest wildlife preserves, National Bison Range is neither the oldest federal bison refuge nor the largest in number of animals. Older by three years (it was established in 1905) is southwestern Oklahoma's Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge just off I-44, near Lawton. More than 600 bison range there. In all, more than 100,000 bison survive today on U.S. and Canadian refuges, and on private ranches.

Records from the Northern Pacific Railroad, which carried to eastern markets most of the commercial bison hunters' buffalo robes (for which hunters received \$1 to \$3 apiece), only partially document the scale of the slaughter. In 1882, 200,000 robes were shipped on the railroad; in 1883, 40,000 . . . and by 1885 — just four years later — none. For every bison killed and stripped of its hide, another five, say most historians, were simply left to rot on the prairies.

The bison's instinct to bunch rather than run when threatened hastened their demise. So did the invention in 1871 of a process for commercially tanning the buffalo's thick hide.

As the true extent of the slaughter became known, the public and conservationists — notably the American Bison Society — demanded that the U.S. Congress preserve the few surviving bison. Their strong ally was President Theodore Roosevelt. He had witnessed the slaughter firsthand on the North Dakota prairies.



The National Bison Range was established in 1908. Nearly 19,000 acres were purchased from the Indian owners (the range lies within the Flathead Indian Reservation). The American Bison Society raised \$10,000 to stock the new refuge. Thirty-four bison — descendants of the few survivors — were purchased, some from their Indian owners. These, and seven donated animals — 41 animals in all — were released on the National Bison Range on Oct. 17, 1909. Today, the annual sell-off of surplus animals makes the range virtually self-supporting.

The range is among the most scenic of all Quick Stops, for it nestles beneath the snowcapped Mission Mountains.

The National Bison Range (no charge) is open daily. From mid-May to mid-October, the Visitor Center is open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m.; from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday-Friday, the rest of the year. Self-guided auto tours: 7 a.m. to dusk mid-May to mid-October; daily, but restricted to the shorter drive, the rest of the year, weather permitting.

GETTING THERE: Leave I-90 at the U.S. 93/State Route 200 exit, 8 miles west of Missoula, Mont. Drive north 28 miles on U.S. 93/Route 200 to just north of the town of Ravalli, where State Route 200 separates, veering west. Follow State Route 200 west about 6 miles to Dixon, where Route 200 and State Route 212 join. Drive north on Route 212 (a good oiled road) approximately 4 miles to the hamlet of Moiese and the National Bison Range's entrance and Visitor Center. It is approximately 38 miles from the I-90 exit to the Bison Range.

FOR MORE INFORMATION. For a brochure and self-guided auto tour pamphlet, write Range Manager, National Bison Range, Moiese, Mont. 59824. Or phone (406) 644-2211.